

“IDENTITIES LOST AND FOUND IN THE COMMEMORATIVE LANDSCAPES OF THE GREAT WAR”

- Karen Shelby -

In the past twenty-odd years, research and museum exhibitions on the histories of World War I has expanded considerably to include the participation of the Indian Expeditionary Forces (IEF) and the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC)¹. In turn, this interest has prompted an increase in the visibility of Indian soldiers and Chinese labourers in the Commonwealth cemeteries and the additions of monuments to the remembrance landscape. Considerations were given to the multiplicity of Indian religions and cultures in the IEF as well as the CLC in the official burial practices after the war. But sometimes, as a direct result of those considerations, both groups remain elusive in the postwar landscape. Additionally, the signs and symbols of the new monuments are also not always understood by a, still, predominantly Western audience.

This article will address the ways in which the imposition of a British narrative – visible in the topography of the Flemish landscape – has been modified in the twenty-first century to a reflect a more *visually* inclusive remembrance practice. By examining the choices made by community and political groups, this article explains the iconography of these additions to the Flemish landscape, with a critical eye toward placement and reception. In the attempts to decolonize the visible warscape, the goal must not simply be to add to the discourse, but to also address the structures that initially shaped it. Those in power construct and reiterate social, political, and economic power structures in the built environment². Site specific building programs legitimize and ennoble some groups and exclude and silence others. This is underscored in commemorative architecture, which visually amplifies messages of communal belonging or separation. Given the need to formalize an overarching national narrative after the war, it is unsurprising that the British Empire chose the language of classicism. The importance of the classical referent in the origins of modern nations underscored an exaltation of classical virtues as well as served to enhance the nation's prestige. Since ancient Greece is perceived as “repository of eternal, transhistorical value”³, the choices made by the Imperial War Graves Commission served to insert symbols of strength and beauty into the destroyed Flemish plains. These symbols, which had been successfully integrated in Britain and its empire in the nineteenth century, were thus recognizable forms of mourning for grieving visitors to Flanders.

However, given the cultural and religious multiplicity of soldiers who fought for the Commonwealth, the Imperial War Graves Commission struggled with how to address inclusive commemoration after the Armistice. Not only was there differences among the Dominions, but an even greater difference presented itself when confronted with the Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim soldiers from the IEF, many of whom followed particular religions practices within these subgroups. Because of decisions made to honor the religious practices of the IEF soldiers, those soldiers whose ideologies favored cremation, for example, are not noted in the built environment. For all intents and purposes, they, and their actions, are invisible for twenty-first century audiences. As a labour force, members of the CLC were buried, re-buried, and re-located, sometimes far from the original death sites.

I. Brown Bodies in Flanders⁴: Visibility During the War and Invisibility After

The Chinese Labour Force (CLC), as its name implies, was a labor force, hailing primarily from the Shandong Province in China, recruited by the British government to provide support for the British battalions at the Front. The CLC first worked for the French in 1915 and were recruited to work for Britain in both France and Belgium the following year. Members of the Corps often worked in or close to the military zones. Members of the CLC

1. The literature on the CLC includes significant contributions by SANJING CHEN and FANG-SHANG LU, *Ouzhan Huagong shiliao, 1912-1921 (Archival sources regarding Chinese laborers during the European war)*, Taipei 1997; MICHAEL BRYNMÖR SUMMERSKILL, *China on the Western Front. Britain's Chinese work force in the First World War*, London 1982; and GUOQI XU, GUOQI, *Strangers on the Western Front. Chinese workers in the Great War*, Cambridge 2011. A historiography of South Asian research is compiled in Florian Stadler's “Historiography 1918-Today (India)” in 1914-1918-online, The International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ, HEATHER JONES, JENNIFER KEENE, ALAN KRAMER, and BILL NASSON, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-04-07. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10602. Accessed 27 October 2020. Talbot House, the Lijssenthoek Visitor's Centre, the In Flanders Fields Museum (IFFM), and other museums and interpretive centres in Flanders provide information on the role of the CLC and the IEF in aiding the allies on the front within the larger context of the war. The IFFM, in particular, has mounted comprehensive exhibitions addressing the singular contributions of both groups.
2. MARGARET E. FARRAR, *Building the Body Politic: Power and Urban Space in Washington, D.C.*, University of Illinois, 2008, p. 38.
3. ATHENA LEOUSSI, “Making Nations in the Image of Greece: Classical Greek Conceptions of the Body in the Construction of National Identity in Nineteenth-Century England. France and German,” in THORSTEN FÖGEN, RICHARD WARREN (eds.), *Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Idea of Nationalism in the 19th Century: Case Studies*. De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 45-70.
4. Santanu Das suggests that over four million non-white men were mobilised into the European and American armies during the First World War, in combatant and non-combatant roles. DAS, ed. ‘Introduction’, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Cambridge, 2011.

died during bombardments and from clearing former battlefields that still contained unexploded mines. The Indian army, originally conceived prior to the war as an auxiliary force for the British army, was dispatched to France and Belgium after the Battle of Mons in August 1914. Indian Expeditionary Force A (IEFA) arrived in the Ieper Salient in October 1914 fighting in the First Battle of Ieper (25 October – 15 November 1914). The infantry divisions withdrew in 1915 leaving two cavalry divisions, which, at times, also served in the trenches as infantry. The Indian Corps was ordered to hold a line seventeen km long, which was one-third of the line held by the British 1 Army⁵.

These two groups, as historian Dominiek Dendooven underscores, asserted their own agency during the war and were not merely “passive receptacles of Western civilization” or understood only through British colonial trappings⁶. It is telling, then, that, discernable traces of the formidable contributions of the CLC and the IEFA in the Flemish landscape are few. The members of the CLC and the IEFA who died in Flanders remain marginalized in the Commonwealth cemeteries subsumed into a British visual language. Since monuments and cemeteries dictate how visitors understand the consequences of a battle, the history of the CLC and the IEFA has suffered.

II. Landscapes of the Great War

When it comes to Great War tourism, visitors overwhelmingly organize their visits around the sites

of battlefields. Jennifer Iles notes that “it is the vanishing battlefields that enable modern-day visitors to glance upon the real horrors of war; battlefield tourism is largely an outdoor activity, and tourists expect that the actual sites of warfare rather than museum visits, be the main focus of their visit”. As one field guide commented, the “real museum is found on the ground”⁷. However, the ability of the landscape to directly tell the story of the war was greatly diminished in the immediate post-war years when the Flemish, in order to reclaim their land, removed the traces of the war – with the exception cemeteries and other remembrance sites that are permanently claimed by the nations of the Commonwealth. It is these traces that are being reactivated by postcolonial studies and the need to acknowledge the global context of the war in Flanders Fields.

In the decade after the Armistice, it was the British government that controlled the creation of public remembrance sites in land either donated by or purchased from the Belgian government. This process excluded input from survivors and the bereaved, a consequence of the decision regarding the repatriation of the bodies of British soldiers⁸. Also excluded were the voices from those in the paid labor forces and the diversity of soldiers from the colonies and dominions. As a result, a form of British identity was imposed in Western Flanders through the choice of the arrestingly visual organizational structure of the postwar battlefield and the marginalization of the CLC and soldiers from the colonies and dominions, like those from the IEFA. This “palimpsest(s) of overlapping, mul-

5. CLAUDE MARKOVITS, “Indian Expeditionary Force” 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ, HEATHER JONES, JENNIFER KEENE, ALAN KRAMER, and BILL NASSON, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2018-06-26. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11057. Accessed 10 October 2020.

6. DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, “Asians on the Western Front: The Forgotten Soldiers of World War I”, *The Low Countries*, 11 May 2019, <https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/asians-on-the-western-front-the-forgotten-soldiers-of-world-war-i>. Accessed 10 October 2020.

7. JENNIFER ILES, “Going on Holiday to Imagine War: The Western Front Battlefields as Sites of Commemoration and Contestation”, in JONATHAN SKINNER and DIMITRIOS THEODOSSOPOULOS (eds.), *Great Expectations: Imagination and Anticipation in Tourism*, London, 2011, p. 166.

8. See P. LONGWORTH, *The Unending Vigil: The History of the Commonwealth Graves Commission*, Barnsely, 2003.

ti-vocal landscapes”⁹ reveals a British “imagined community” on Flemish land¹⁰. Gradually, as the neglected aspects of the war and marginalized groups have entered into the histories of the war, this democratization of commemoration can be seen in the increase in state and local government involvement and through sponsorship of remembrance sites by public and private organizations, which focus on moving the marginalized to the center. This sentiment is echoed by those who visit the sites of the Great War.

In 2012, the World Heritage Tourism Research Network conducted an online survey in sixty-one countries in order to determine the relevant variables in the ongoing “touristification” process of former war landscapes. Respondents indicated that since those engaged in the heavy battles in Flanders and France came from many parts of the (colonial) world, “it will be important if [the centenary] interprets the impact on former colonies that provided the fighting power and if the descendants and aging survivors in those countries are recognized.”¹¹ Western colonial mythologies need to be reinterpreted and untold stories need to be told if it is to be called a “World War.”¹² As a result, centenary efforts focused on explaining the system of identification, through mapping and naming, that was developed after the war to create the cemetery “memoryscapes”, or what we

refer to as remembrance-scapes in the twenty-first century. In postwar commemorative practices, the emptiness and stillness was marked as a narrative configured through landscape design, or what Maoz Azaryahu and Kenneth Foote call spatial narratives. A number of wide-ranging strategies, including issues of trauma, discrimination, anger, shame, and survival, were created to address the complex historical stories of the war. As Derek H. Alderman and Joshua F. J. Inwood contend, having a place in an event’s past is essential to asserting one’s agency¹³. These strategies became important conduits not only for giving a voice to certain visions of history, but also in casting legitimacy upon the participants in them at the expense of delegitimizing others¹⁴.

During the centenary, institutions across Belgium, from Liège and Antwerp to, most famously, Ieper, re-addressed their strategies in order to provide a more inclusive experience for visitors, both Belgian and foreign, of those who participated in the war¹⁵. With a strategic eye toward folding local and international histories into the narratives, the sites expanded upon traditional practices of showing things in wooden vitrines in hushed and hallowed halls, and augmented their interpretive materials. Addendums such as interpretive centers and small memorials were added to the cemeteries and monuments. In 2014–18, museums brought

9. NICHOLAS SAUNDERS, “Matter and Memory in the Landscapes of Conflict: The Western Front 1914–1999”, in *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place*, Oxford, 2001, p. 37.

10. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, New York, 1983. In addition, after the war those who identify with a Flemish rather than Belgian identity within the Kingdom of Belgium argued that a Belgian identity had been imposed upon the Flemish soldiers through a uniform headstone design. See KAREN SHELBY, *Flemish Nationalism and the Great War: The Politics of Memory, Visual Culture, and Commemoration*, London, 2014.

11. “Memoryscapes of the Great War (1914–1918): A Paradigm Shift in Tourism Research on War Heritage”, WHTRN, World Heritage Tourism Research Network, 2012. Final report submitted by MYRIAM JANSEN-VERBEKE (University Leuven), Accessed 13 December 2019. The survey consisted of open questions regarding values, experiences, and memories from over 2,400 respondents. The WHTRN is an international and multidisciplinary network of social scientists was launched by Dr. E. Wanda George. The objective is to exchange knowledge and expertise to develop a collaborative and comparative research program that would focus on growing concerns and issues associated with the designation of UNESCO World Heritage status.

12. Ibid.

13. DEREK H. ALDERMAN and JOSHUA F. J. INWOOD, “Landscapes of Memory and Socially Just Futures” in NUALA JOHNSON, RICHARD SCHEIN and JAMIE WINDERS (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, Hoboken, p. 191.

14. ALDERMAN and INWOOD, “Landscapes of Memory and Socially Just Futures”, p. 191.

15. It should be noted that the IFFM, in its first permanent exhibition mounted in 1999, was one of the first museums to address multi-national presence in the Ieper Salient.

a nuanced and interdisciplinary methodology to the exhibitions, both permanent and temporary. Instead of promoting universal truths through their exhibitions, they instead acknowledged that display is no more an act of promoting some truths at the expense of others¹⁶. Additionally, visitors have increasingly been considered as active participants in their experiences, and not merely passive recipients of information. As a result of these shifts, the institutions in West Flanders re-evaluated the multifaceted relationship with their environs, including the connection that many British feel to the West Flanders landscape, and the multiple histories therein. But the landscape itself is, for the most part, remained frozen in the contours of the postwar remembrance topography.

Contemporary societies invest heavily in monuments, museums, archives, and historic places – Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* – in order to replace “real environments of memory”¹⁷. In a country that is a mere 30,688 km², the number of museums, visitor centers, cemeteries, and other sites dedicated to 1914–18 is formidable. At times it appears that every patch of land, whether paved in stone or covered in grass, particularly in Western Flanders, is claimed as a site of history for the Great War. What we, in the twenty-first century, experience is not a memory of the events from 1914–18, but rather a reconstructed history mediated through monuments, texts, icons, images, and the reshaping of the land – what Marita Sturken calls “technologies of memory”¹⁸. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan suggested in 1999 that “memory” be replaced with “remembrance”¹⁹. In choosing the term remembrance, they addressed the question of *who* remembers and *how*. This method of compiling a historical narrative is a process of recollection with agency, and it creates, along with both

traditional and social media, a dialogue that cuts across towns and provinces in Belgium and the many countries that were brought together in Belgium between 1914 and 1918. Laurence Van Ypersele underscores that, particular for the framework of the Great War and the commemorative preparations for the centenary, “to commemorate” meant to collectively evoke past events in such a way that they create a foundation for our identity, our “being together”²⁰. By the end of the war, hundreds of thousands, if not millions of individuals from across some fifty countries, or what Piet Chielens and Dominiek Dendooven call “five continents in Flanders”²⁰, had experienced the leper Salient firsthand. But only a limited number gained agency postwar and were thus able to shape the memory – the sense of “being together” – and then history, of the “Devil’s Playground”.

After the war, the perceived formlessness of the warscape acquired definitive shape, function and meaning through the organization and construction of the cemeteries for Commonwealth soldiers; it was, after all, the *Imperial War Graves Commission* in charge of postwar commemoration policies. Jay Winter notes that in 1918 the ties holding Britain and her dependencies together were coming apart²¹, but the cemeteries and other commemorative rituals and sites continued to bind them together through, literally, common ground. Conversely, notions of Britishness were also strengthened. Other nations, such as Belgian and Germany, also shaped the postwar landscape, but due to the sheer numbers of dead, a British presence was predominant. These were manufactured to serve as a unifying site with a connection to Imperial Britain. Homogenous headstones, the inclusion of the Sir Edwin Lutyens Stone of Remembrance (at sites that contain more than forty

16. KATHLEEN McLEAN, “Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue”, *Daedalus*, vol. 128, no. 3, 1999, p. 84.

17. PIERRE NORA, *Les lieux des mémoires*, Paris, 1984-92.

18. MARITA STURKEN, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Berkeley, 1997.

19. JAY WINTER and EMMANUEL SIVAN (eds.), “Chapter One”, in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 6-39.

20. PIET CHIELENS and DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, *WWI: Five Continents in Flanders*, Lannoo, 2009.

21. JAY WINTER, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, Yale, 2006, p. 168.

or more graves), Sir Reginald Blomfield's Cross of Sacrifice (at sites that contain more than 1000 graves), and a profusion of perennials surrounded by a low-lying wall speak to the signs of British identity. Each soldier is allocated an individual grave—both officers and soldiers—to emphasize the democratic principle of civic equality. While the language of the public monuments such as the Menin Gate translates classicism into formidable forms of contemporary mourning and loss, the language of the cemeteries, following the recommendations of Sir Frederic Kenyon, is that of a pastoral idyll, an imported British, or more specifically, *English* landscape²². Additionally, Rupert Brooke's poem "The Soldier" (1916) was often quoted in newspapers and by those involved in the construction of the war cemeteries in the 1920s²³. Brooke's "corner of a foreign field that is for ever England" underscored the English wish to be seen by itself and by other nations "at the end of its passage through an ordeal that tested the roots of its culture and identity to destruction"²⁴.

III. Cemeteries

Military cemeteries and monuments perpetuate remembrance through a dialogue with an audience that underscores the cult of the fallen: memorialization, individualization, equalization, democratization, emotionalization, and the tension between secularization and sacralization²⁵. The Great War collection cemeteries created in the 1920s underscored uniformity, effectively erasing distinctions between class and race for the multitude of participants fighting for the British

Crown. Overt visibility for the IEFA and the CLC did not take place until nearly a half century later. While the goal of equality of death was to radicalize the idea of national parity, it also served to effectively erase the distinctive identities of those from the colonies and China. A case in point is the Lijssenthoek Cemetery, established in the former communication line between the leper battlefields and the Allied military bases in the rear⁴⁸, which includes thirty-five members of the CLC among the 10,784 casualties.

At Lijssenthoek, as in all Commonwealth cemeteries along the Western Front, the graves are marked by headstones of Portland stone from Dorset, England. The stone wall and plantings of an English perennial garden mark the gravesites and the boundaries of the site. Blomfield's Cross of Sacrifice, which rises above the flat fields of Flanders, initially seems to negate the presence of the Sikh and Muslim soldiers²⁶ and the Buddhist Chinese labourers. Lieut-Colonel Sir Frederic Kenyon justified the cross by asserting, "It will be understood that where our Mohammedan [*sic*], Hindu, and other non-Christian fellow subject lie ... their graves will be treated in accordance with their own religious beliefs and practices, and their own religious symbol will be placed over them"²⁷. Due to the addition of visitor centers and revision of exhibition content in the 1990s and again in the years leading up to centennial, visitors now know to look for those small details that denote difference within the field of conformity. Upon close inspection, each stone designates the individual's national heritage. The national emblem of the soldier's birthplace is placed at the top of the stone

22. See, for example, for example, DAVID LOWENTHAL, "British National Identity and the English Landscape", in *Rural History*, Vol 2, Issue 2, 1991, p. 213.

23. JOHNSON, "On the Particularism of English Landscape Archeology," (...), p. 114.

24. JOHNSON, "On the Particularism of English Landscape Archeology," (...), p. 114.

25. MANFRED HETTLING and TINO SCHÖLZ, "Bereavement and Mourning", in *1914-1918-Online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ, HEATHER JONES, JENNIFER KEENE, ALAN KRAMER, and BILL NASSON, trans. NICHOLAS POTTER, Berlin 2019, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11401. Accessed 2 November 2020.

26. The Cross of Remembrance is not placed in cemeteries with a majority of non-Christian burials.

27. Lieut-Colonel SIR FREDERIC KENYON, K.C.B. Director of the British Museum. *War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad Will Be Designed, Report to the Imperial War Graves Commission*, London: H.M.S.O., 1918. Also available on-line <http://nla.au.nla.obj-52871670>.

– maple leaves for Canadians, silver leaf ferns for those from New Zealand, etc. – and his name and rank are engraved beneath. The largest image, in the lower half of the stone, designates religious affiliation, with a Star of David or a Latin cross. For Muslim soldiers, the top of the stone is formed in an Islamic architectural arch containing a crescent, which represents Islam, and a five-pointed star, which symbolizes the five pillars of Islam. Headstones for the Sikh soldiers include prayers in Arabic or Gurmukhi, the written form of the Punjabi language. ‘This is the grave of the deceased’ is inscribed in Arabic on the gravestones of Muslim soldiers followed by the name of the soldier.

It is notable that there are few soldiers from the IEFA interred in Lijssenthoek, and in other Commonwealth cemeteries. Central to Sikh and Hindu practice was cremation. However, if cremations could not be carried out, then headstones were placed over the graves. The results are fewer bodies to mark with headstones. For Muslim burials the committee recommended that “except in cases where there was the slightest apprehension of the grave being moved, Mohammedan graves should be left undisturbed²⁸.” If re-interment became necessary then it should take place at a central cemetery. Given the multiple religious and cultural groups represented in the IEFA, care was by the Indian Graves Committee in 1918, which

was formed to oversee burial and commemoration of the Indian soldiers²⁹ The Indian Graves Committee and the India Office decided that when thirty or more Indian soldiers are buried in one cemetery, the graves should were to be placed a separate plot within the cemetery wall and marked off by a low hedge. This practice was followed in the burials of the CLC.

“Dead but still lives in our heart” is inscribed on the gravestones of the thirty-five Chinese labourers at Lijssenthoek, buried in a separate plot within the larger Commonwealth cemetery³⁰. While all combatants are buried within the same mourning spaces, in 1917 the British Directorate of Labour noted that the “Chinese should not be buried in Christian Cemeteries unless it is impracticable to provide special cemeteries for them, in which case they may be buried in a corner of a military or communal cemetery in such a way that their graves are not completely surrounded by graves of Europeans”³¹. While this statement seems to indicate acknowledgement that the CLC graves should not be lost among the British, in practice the result was the segregation of the CLC within the cemeteries³². Aerial photographs indicate the locations of the vanished Chinese camp and cemetery near Busseboom, Reningelst, Proven, Sint-Jan-ter-Biezen, Abele, and along the Poperinge-Ieper road. Often, the photographs serve as

28. Ibid. As Islam forbids the exhumation of remains, the Commission considered allowing Muslim graves with little risk of being disturbed to be improved with pucca mounds and tablets and left in place. Sir Frederic Kenyon suggested that “the time will come when this area will be given back to cultivation” and that “if there be any risk of these graves being removed or ploughed up at any time in the future it is better that the remains buried therein may be removed now to the proposed Muslim cemetery” and reburied under the supervision of an Imam from a local mosque. Sahibzada Aftab Khan, Letter to the Imperial War Graves Commission, 16th February 1918. Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archives, Catalogue Number 263, Item WG 909/7, from ROGER SIMS, “To the Memory of Brave Men: The Imperial War Graves Commission and India’s Missing Soldiers of the First World War”, (2018). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019*. 5820. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/5820>.

29. Imperial War Graves Commission, *Meeting of the Indian Graves Committee held at the India Office, on the 20th March 1918, at 12 noon*, WG 909/9. Ibid.

30. Other cemeteries where Chinese labourers were buried are include seven graves at Reninghelst New Military Cemetery, eight in the Mendighem Military Cemetery, four in the Haringhe (Bandaghem) Military Cemetery, four at Gwalia Cemetery, one grave in Poperinge New Military Cemetery, and one in Poperinge Old Military Cemetery.

31. Directorate of Labour, Appendix to Notes for Officers of Labour Companies, *Chinese Labour*, October 1917.

32. After the war, many Chinese graves and even entire cemeteries, such as next to the hospital at Remy Siding outside of Poperinge, were cleared and transferred to British military cemeteries in France. Exhibition, *Toiling for War: Chinese Labourers in World War I*, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper, 2010. A comprehensive history of the Chinese along the Western Front can be found in DOMINIEK DENDOOVEN, *De vergeten soldaten van de eerste Wereldoorlog*, Epo, Uitgeverij, 2019.



A Chinese Labour Corps Grave at Lijssenthoek Cemetery. Photograph by Matthew Haultain-Gall, 2013.

the only indexicality of these former sites of activity. The circumstances of the reclamation of the former sites of the CLC and the preservation of Talbot house, a mere 3km away in Poperinge, and the lack of monuments to the IEFA and the CLC underscores the differences in the ways the war is inscribed in the landscape.

IV. Monuments

Fueled by the centennial, a number of books and journals addressed the deficiency of colonial narratives in the World War I scholarship³³, which was mirrored by efforts to add the missing narratives to the built environment. Folded into a British national commemorative praxis, the presence of IEFA soldiers was essentially erased in Flanders Fields postwar. Their contributions were also neglected in India, which remained under British rule until Partition in 1947. Many of those who joined the IEFA were professional soldiers and thus perceived to have gone abroad to serve foreign masters: “Losing your life or limb in a foreign war fought at the behest of your colonial rulers was an occupational hazard – it did not qualify as a form of national service”³⁴. As a result, their actions were not acknowledged on a national level; they were only mourned individually by their families. After Partition, the Indian and Pakistani governments continued to be disinclined to

honor the Indian soldiers. Many who had participated in a colonial war were recruited from castes and ethnicities that were classified by the British as ‘martial races’³⁵. Manipulated by the British Raj in order to guarantee higher loyalty of the Indian troops, the “martial race” doctrine was used as an instrument of imperial power. This controversy remains an underlying concern as the number of monuments rises. Commemoration sites of the colonised within a coloniser’s own territory – in this case British remembrance spaces within Flanders – struggle for meaning. As recently as 2015, this sentiment was echoed in an anonymous response to Dominiek Dendooven’s visit to Khalsa College, Amritsar in the state of Punjab: “What is the intent ... [of] fighting like mercenaries and slaves alongside colonial rulers?”³⁶ As a result, one of the issues is how to acknowledge the diversity of South Asian soldiers from the Indian sub-continent during the British Raj – race, ethnicity, class, and religious practices – who fought in Flanders³⁷. This is particularly true for the Muslim soldiers. While there is no actual edict barring figural representation within Islam, it has been adopted in common practice. A statue of a soldier serving as a stand-in for the IEFA was not an option. Even the term “Islam,” similar to the variety of ideologies within Hinduism, in regards to the practice of the religion itself causes some issues, as it suggests that all practitioners shared similar perspectives and interpretations.

33. See, for example, see FLORIAN STADTLER’s “Historiography 1918-Today (India)” in 1914-1918-online, The International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by UTE DANIEL, PETER GATRELL, OLIVER JANZ, HEATHER JONES, JENNIFER KEENE, ALAN KRAMER, and BILL NASSON, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-04-07. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10602. Accessed 27 October 2020.

34. SHASHI THAROOR, “Why the Indian Soldiers of WW1 Were Forgotten”, *BBC Magazine*, 1 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33317368>. Shashi Tharoor is a former minister in India’s Congress party and a former UN diplomat.

35. GEORGE MORTON-JACK, *The Indian Army on the Western Front India’s Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 3.

36. NEHA SAINI, “Belgian Historian Recalls Sacrifices of Sikh Soldiers in WWI”, *SikhNet*, 30 April 2015. <https://www.sikhnet.com/news/belgian-historian-recalls-sacrifices-sikh-soldiers-wwi>. Accessed 17 November 2020.

37. These included Muslim-dominated Pathan tribes – Afridis, Orakzais, Mahsuds, Waziris, Khattaks and Yusufzais – from the North-West Frontier Province; the Hazaras from central Afghanistan and now settled in Baluchistan; Punjabi Muslims like the Gakkhar and other northern Punjabi clans. From among the Hindus were Dogras of Kangra and Jats of Rohtak, both Punjabi, and Garhwalis from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. The Sikhs included Jats and Muzbees of the Gujranwala and Lyallpur districts of central Punjab. This list is taken directly from Morton-Jack, p. 3. Additionally, 200,000 Gurkha (post-Independence spelled Gorkhas) divisions comprised of Magars, Gurungs and other Gorkha tribesman, from Nepal served in the British Army, suffering roughly 20,000 casualties. JOHN PARKER, *The Gurkhas: The Inside Story of the World’s Most Feared Soldiers*, Headline Book Publishing, 2005.



Indian Forces Memorial, 2011. Photograph by An-Marie Broom, 2021.

The Indian Forces Memorial on the leper ramparts attempts to solve the issue of inclusivity by utilizing the national emblem India. Choosing a sanctioned national symbol underscores the intent of the monument to serve as an all-encompassing acknowledgment of Indian participation on the Salient.

Of the three monuments to the Indian soldiers added to the Flemish war landscape, the Indian Forces Memorial is the most striking. Through what would be unusual imagery for western eyes, the sculpture asserts an Indian presence. Eschewing traditional western figurative forms of commemoration, the statue is a replication of one of the Aśokan lion capitals, which capped hundreds of pillars believed to have been raised by King Aśoka throughout the Magadha region of North India³⁸. The most famous of these capitals is the one that was found at Sarnath (250 B.C.E.). King Aśoka's merits, underscoring his commitment to the Buddhist ideals of wisdom and compassion, are intertwined with Buddhist sutras. The lion, an ancient symbol of royalty and leadership, served as a dual sign of both Aśoka and the Buddha. The four lions on the monument roar the Buddhist doctrine (the *dharma*) known as the Four Noble Truths to the four cardinal directions. The lions also represent four characteristics of a strong leader: power, courage and confidence. They sit atop an abacus upon which are carved four wheels or *cakras* and four animals, an analogy for the Buddhist concept of *samsara* - the endless cycle of birth and rebirth³⁹ as well as, within Buddhism, the four pivotal moments of the Buddha's life: his birth, enlightenment, first sermon (through which he shared his teachings of the *dharma* at Sarnath), and his death⁴⁰. In Hinduism, the animals and *cakras* on the abacus represent a secular interpretation of Aśoka's enlightened reign of non-violence

in all directions from Madgadha. The connections between the symbols of the lion capital and the postwar peaceful rhetoric are striking. Aśoka's acceptance of Buddhism was the result of witnessing the devastation after the successful Battle of Kalinga (261 B.C.E.). Affected by the bloodshed, he was filled with remorse and resolved to pursue a non-violent and peaceful approach to life. The latter symbolism is a fitting one in this context as leper is also known as a "city of peace".

The Indian Forces Memorial replaced a stone of remembrance, with a small relief of the Aśokan capital at the top, that was added to the leper ramparts to the southern side of the Menin Gate in 2002. The Menin Gate marks the spot over which Commonwealth forces crossed the leperlee Canal on their way east to the battlefields of the Salient. Some 54,389 names of soldiers and officers from the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Forces (with the exception of those from New Zealand and Newfoundland, are listed by name. Through a Belgium incentive and at the request of the Indian government, the Indian Forces Memorial was added to the remembrance landscape in leper in order to acknowledge the IEFA soldiers. The memorial provides a marked signal of visibility through its white verticality and dynamic lions placed against the stillness of the classically inspired Menin Gate. But, standing at only 1.8 meters tall, the Indian Forces Memorial is dwarfed by that very classicism. The gate, reminiscent of a Roman triumphal arch, rises to a striking 14.5 meters high. The Indian Forces Memorial is placed against on the southern side. At both entrances, the arch is comprised of Roman pilasters of the Greek Doric order with triglyphs and metopes. Six mourning wreaths, borrowed from Greek funerary practice, are mounted at the top, flanking the entablature.

38. In order to honor the multiplicity of Indian cultures at unification in 1947, the Buddhist symbolism of Aśoka's capital was chosen, 26 January 1950, as a symbol of India's affirmation of the Aśoka's commitment to peace and goodwill.

39. For more information see KAREN SHELBY, "The Pillars of Ashoka," *Smarthistory*, 9 August 2015. <https://smarthistory.org/the-pillars-of-ashoka/>.

40. The four animals are also symbolic of qualities valued within both Buddhism and secular life: the bull represents hard work and steadfastness, the elephant strength, the lion represents bravery, and the horse represents loyalty, speed, and energy.

These formal decisions, made by Blomfeld and Sir Herbert Baker, the two principal architects of the monuments and cemeteries in the salient, were certainly not unusual in the postwar years. The architectural grandeur of classicism was linked to the severity and gravity of sacrifice and thus a perfect form to appropriate for the war. For the Menin Gate, Blomfeld simplified the classical ornamentation presenting a cleaner and more linear façade. Given the non-traditional aspects of the war itself, the architects of remembrance re-interpreted the classical form creating interactive structures comprised of a multitude of arches rather than the singular arch of associated with a Roman imperial triumphal arch. The goal was to place the dead into the lives and landscapes of the living. These modified classical forms also served as a subtle critique of the futility of the war. The metopes, which are typically used for sculpted battled scenes designed to emphasize the victorious Greeks, remain empty; essentially none were victorious in this war. Instead of celebrating the victory of an imperial leader, the Menin Gate, and similar monuments dedicated in Flanders and France, was raised in remembrance of the officers and soldiers who died for British interests. This modernist take on classicism also underscored the dual identity of the soldier as that of a private citizen and a member of a political entity: the nation. The Great War marked the climax of the nineteenth century's civic-national commemoration of the fallen⁴¹. On the Western Front, these large memorials acknowledge the individual death of every British man. The ways in which singular death was noted during and after the war and the subsequent monuments raised to European dead have been the subject of extensive and detailed analyses. Those recently raised to the IEFA, which do not emphasize naming in the remembrance practice, lack similar analysis, particularly on the many websites and message boards dedicated to the war, but also in scholarly publications. For many visitors to the Indian Forces

Memorial serves as the introduction to the collective sacrifice of the 130,000 members of the IEF that were assigned to this region.

Since colonial rulers - in this case the British Government through the Commonwealth Graves Commission - are unreliable narrators, adding even a singular monument to the remembrance landscape serves to broaden narrative of the war. But the Indian Forces Memorial remains visually dwarfed by the imposing Menin Gate and offers little context through which to understand the iconology. Since the symbolic referents of the 3rd century Aśokan capital were re-interpreted when it was adopted for the Dominion of India in 1947, Rinald D'Souza suggests that apart from valour, the soldiers need to also be acknowledged as instrumental within a larger historical narrative of twentieth-century India in displacing a colonial past⁴².

One method of acknowledgement is a simple one: "God is one, he is victory" in English on the Indian Forces Memorial corresponds with several languages from the Indian continent. In light of its position as a universal monument, specific ethnicities or cultures of British India are not noted. In contrast, the Gurkhas are commemorated in a figurative monument located on the ramparts facing the Menin Gate. It stands in close proximity to the Indian Forces Memorial. The monument, sponsored by the Nepalese Embassy with the support of Ieper and the Commonwealth Graves Commission, honors the Gurkhas who died in the Salient, particularly on 27 April 1915 at Pilkem Ridge. After the great losses in the British army during the 1814-16 Gurkha War between British East India Company and Kingdom of Gorkha (present-day Nepal), the British and Girvan Yuddha Bikram Shah came to an agreement, through a provision under the Treaty of Sugauli, that allowed the British to recruit Gurkhas to serve in the British army. Thus, one hundred years later, in 1914, the IEF was sent to

41. MANFRED HETTLING and TINO SCHÖLZ, "Bereavement and Mourning", Accessed 2 November 2020.

42. RINALD D'SOUZA, "The Memory of Indians in Flanders Fields", *Historia Domus*, 29 June 2029. <https://historiadomus.net/2019/06/29/the-memory-of-indians-in-flanders-fields/#fnref-589-17>. Accessed 17 October 2020.

France. After stabilising British troops, the Gurkha regiments were dispatched to other theaters of war including the Ieper Salient. The monument was dedicated in 2015 to coincide with the centenary of the battles with which the Gurkhas participated throughout the same year. While the Indian Forces Memorial, roughly, is placed at eye-level for viewers, the Gurkha figure is placed on a plinth; viewers gaze upwards at the life-size statue of the soldier who is portrayed in uniform gazing off into the distance. Known for fierce actions during combat – according to legend, the name comes from a warrior saint, Guru Gorkhanath⁴³ – it is notable that the statue portrays a Gurkha soldier at ease. The figure is also framed by two iconic Flemish pollarded willows, symbols used in so many visual accounts of the war to underscore material devastation. It also a peculiar way to underscore, as it were, the presence of something so foreign, in 14-18, as India in Flanders.

A smaller and rather unobtrusive monument to the Indian army is located on Eekhofstraat in Ieper. It also acknowledges the individual actions of Sepoy Khudadad Khan, of the 129th Baluchis. The monument was dedicated in 1999, making it one of the first monuments to acknowledge the contributions of the IEF on the Western Front. Although Sikhs were only two per cent of India's population in 1914, they represented over 22 per cent of IEPs during the war. Most served in the First Battle of Ieper (22 October to 31 October 1914) and in the Second Battle of Ieper (22 April to 1 May 1915). The memorial is a result of a request from the International Sikh Youth Federation. Khudadad Khan, a machine gunner, is credited with holding off the Germans near the village of Gheluvelt in Hollebeke a town eight kilometers from Ieper. He survived the battle and was the first soldier of the British Indian Army to receive the Victoria Cross. A plaque is mounted at the top of the monument inscribed in three languages: a Punjabi Sikh prayer translated as

"With the Blessings of the True Guru, Victor Belongs to the Almighty God", the Sanskrit "Om Bhagavate Namah" ("Om, I bow to you Lord"), and, in Arabic, "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"⁴⁴. The memorial takes the form of a stele, comprised of the bricks used in vernacular Flemish vernacular in the region. It is an interesting marriage of the two cultures through the language of the Indian sepoys and the language of a localized Flemish landscape.

The monuments to the IEFA perform as disrupters in decolonizing an Imperial postwar landscape, but do so through inclusion and addition; because of restrictions inherent within the cultural differences, there is no actual rupture of the status quo. They do not counter the signs of the British nation that remain etched on the land. The monuments are small and do little to destabilize western identities and their institutions. They still appear to uphold a racial hierarchy in the West's goals of territorial expansion. Their physical appearance is a conundrum. The abstract symbols and language utilized for the IEFA monuments underscores difference in culture, but one that must be overtly explained to visitors. As Elizabeth Buettner notes, within India, European funerary architecture and cemeteries demand to be viewed as sites of struggle over which the meanings and value of South Asia's colonial legacy for different parties are contemplated or contested⁴⁵. It seems par for the course, that the same sentiment is true for those located in Flanders Fields, dwarfed by the signs and symbols of British colonialism.

While the Chinese Labour Forces was not working in Flanders as a British colony, the CLC have also recently been recognized through additions to the warscape. Two statues are located in Busseboom, a village just outside Poperinge. The first was a solitary Chinese labourer by Belgian sculptor Jo Bocklandt, added through a commission by

43. The word Gurkha also comes from the name of a city, Gorkha, in western Nepal.

44. Translation by EDEN GOLSHANI, 3 December 2020.

45. ELIZABETH BUETTNER, "Cemeteries, Public Memory and Raj Nostalgia in Postcolonial Britain and India", *History and Memory*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006), pp. 5-42.



Memorial to the Indian Army, Hollebeke. Photograph by Luc van Waeyenberge, 2021.



Yan Shufen, *Thirteen of Busseboom*, Poperinge, 2017. Photograph by An-Marie Breem, 2021.



Jo Bocklandt, Chinese Labourer, n.d. Photograph by An-Marie Breem, 2021.

the Poperinge town council. Bocklandt modeled the figure on one of the more famous photographs of a member of the CLC carrying an artillery shell. Yan ShuFen, a Chinese national currently working in Belgium, designed the second. Her *Thirteen of Busseboom* was dedicated in November 2017⁴⁶. The monument was commissioned by the People's Republic of China. The unveiling coincided with the centenary of the German bombardment on 15 November 1917 during which thirteen members of the CLC were killed.

Unlike two of the examples of the abstract monuments for the IEFA, those raised for the CLC are all figural representations of members performing the services for the war: carrying shells, digging trenches, and evacuating wounded soldiers. Viewers do not gaze upon a national symbol nor are any of the Chinese figures elevated on pedestals. They remain within the visitors physical and personal space thorough a 1:1 relationship. Even placed on the square plinth, ShuFen's figural group underscores an intimate relationship with the viewer. This contrasts with the monumentality of, for example, the ten-meter-high St. Julian Memorial (*Brooding Soldier*; 1923) by Canadian sculptor Frederick Chapman Clemesha. The differences in scale affects the viewing experience and invites a broader questioning of cultural relationships between the East and the West both in the past and the present in relationship to the legacy of the war.

Through the three different characters, ShuFen invites engagement with each man and his activity. There is no one viewpoint. Visitors walk around the trio experiencing each as individuals as well as a group. Viewer and subject are participants, through which both gain agency. The rough bronze castings of the three figures underscores weathered faces and the texture of their uniforms. Through the set of the digger's jaw and the scout's

open mouth, ShuFen underscores determination and fear. The trio in Busseboom draw attention to the humanity of the Chinese men who died, in contrast to the less remarkable CLC graves, which are subsumed into the broader narrative of the war enclosed within the stone walls of the Commonwealth cemeteries

Visitors to Busseboom respond differently, however, to the solitary figure by Bocklandt. Initially, the statue stood alone in the Busseboom field. The singularity of the figure was appropriate, seeming lost in the vastness of the flat Flemish landscape. The resignation on the figure's face, within infinite landscape and labour, is palpable. But in 2017, the City of Poperinge commissioned Stefan Schöning to design a shelter for Bocklandt's Chinese worker. In contrast to the trio roughly thirty metres away, public interaction with this statue is now passive, a response that is only underscored by the shelter, which limits the figure's engagement with the Flemish surround. The statue is compartmentalized, an artifact upon which to gaze rather than a robust commentary on the re-introduction of the presence of the CLC in and around Poperinge.

It is sculptures like the two noted above that have recaptured the attention of visitors to the plight of the CLC during the war. Through the efforts of Chinese and Chinese-British community groups, histories of the Chinese in the area have also become a tourist draw. Occasionally, specialist organisations facilitate guided tours dedicated to the Chinese participation in the war. One of these is led by the Meridian Society, which was founded in Great Britain to promote, among other issues, knowledge and appreciation of Chinese culture, art, philosophy, and history. An educational package available on the Visit Flanders website also addresses the presence of the Chinese in and around Poperinge⁴⁷.

46. Email correspondence with Wenlan Peng of the Meridien Society, 29 January 2020. See also BRIAN FAWCETT, "Busseboom Thirteen", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, vol. 55, 2015, p. 199–203.

47. "All Continents Present during WWI", Visit Flanders. https://www.visitflanders.com/en/binaries/AllcontinentspresentduringWWI_tcm13-87759.pdf. Accessed 9 February 2020

However, the re-emergence of these histories has not been able free itself from inherent stereotypes of what it is to be Chinese. In conjunction with the unveiling of the *Thirteen of Bosseboom* memorial, and to bring awareness and visibility to the history of the CLC, Poperinge held a festival called “China Back in Town”, or what the Wo1.be website refers to as “Chinks Back in Town”. The unfortunate use of this ethnic slur, with little context to explain its liberal use in 1914–18, perpetuates the very stereotypes the festival had hoped to undermine. The goal of the festival was to build a positive opinion through the signs and symbols of the Western perception of Chinese culture: lanterns, dragons, tea houses, a Chinese buffet, and calligraphy workshops⁴⁸. A mobile app was created to map sites in West Flanders where members of the CLC worked, placing them into the geography of the warscape. However, it is primarily through museum interventions that the wider public learn of the CLC, despite the fact that by 1918 Chinese workers ranked as the largest and longest-serving non-European contingent in the war⁴⁹.

In 2010, the IFFM hosted *Toiling for War: Chinese Labourers in World War I*. This exhibition traced the history of the CLC along the Western Front, which included the manner in which the Chinese were treated after the Armistice, as well as how they were scapegoated by the returning Belgian refugees⁵⁰. Photographs demonstrated the connection of their labor with the land. However, the sections dedicated to their burial indicated an absence of their presence in that land. Their grave-stones were marked with platitudes, in Chinese

but were absent of the names of those who lay beneath. The IFFM indexes the activities of the CLC in the permanent exhibition through the CLC badge and shell cases decorated by CLC members; extensive information available through the 2010 exhibition is archived on the IFFM website⁵¹. These steps are important toward a widespread understanding of how these histories are embedded in the landscape and must be decoded for contemporary visitors – from both east and west.

V. Conclusions

As J. B. Jackson reminds us, since the beginning of history humankind has modified the landscape in order to communicate a message, noting that “out of ruins a new symbol emerges, and a landscape finds form”⁵². In Western Flanders, the socially constructed sites are invested with symbolic meaning that may no longer coincide with the original context in which they were created. If, to quote Benedict Anderson, the idea of the nation is “a product of invention and social engineering”, then acknowledging the narrative devices involved in projecting what is deemed to be a national space is necessary⁵³. Landscapes are understood as markers of specific national connections and, for cultural geographers, their symbolism can be “read” as any other cultural form, thus providing important information that is only accessible through engagement with the sites⁵⁴. However, the additional histories – through both objects and text – in the remembrance spaces must reach beyond the insertion of a postcolo-

48. “2017 - China in Poperinge”, Wo1.be, Accessed 26 January 2020. In pulling together the program, Poperinge cooperated with the Howest Confuciusinstituut and the Centre for Chinese Language and Culture, which is located in Bruges.

49. For more information, see GUOQI XU, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War*, Cambridge, 2011. In recent years interest in the CLC has increased. In 2019, fifteen students from Shanghai University spent a month in Ieper studying the CLC. Several museums in China have also requested the loan of CLC related material owned by the In Flanders Fields Museum. Email correspondence with Dominiek Dendooven, 22 January 2020.

50. “Toiling for War: Chinese Labourers in World War I”, In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper, 2010.

51. The In Flanders Fields Museum holds the largest collection of CLC trench art. In 2019/20, the museum mounted *Dragons on the Western Front*, an exhibition dedicated to Chinese trench art.

52. J. B. JACKSON, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time*, New Haven, 1996.

53. MONICA SPIRIDON, “Spaces of Memory: The City-Text”, European Thematic Network, www.lingue.unibo.it. Accessed 4 November 2020.

54. SIMON PUGH (ed.), *Reading Landscape: Country – City – Capital*, Manchester, 1990.

nial narrative in which these missing accounts are more often than not treated as mere footnotes or nominally highlighted in the occasional temporary exhibition. These sites and the signage posted must openly address the way that the commonly understood and limited stories of the war were constructed and continue to be perpetuated through the current landscape.

In her examination of tourism, museums, and heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that sites like a cemetery or a monument can be limited in its ability to tell its own story⁵⁵. World War I history is coded and decoded, layered with complex narratives of social, cultural, and political history. These signs take the form of the built environment that includes the cemeteries, monuments, museums and visitor centers scattered throughout

Flanders, most specifically in and around the leper Salient. I contend that a critical reading of the symbolic messages written into and deciphered from the former warsapes – a methodology borrowed from the field of cultural geography known as reading the “landscape as text” – can illuminate the diversity of those underrecognized groups who lived in and remain buried in West Flanders. The spaces were built to be read by mourners in the immediate postwar years. When the marginalized, such as the IEFA or the CLC make an attempt at representation, there is an assumption that there is a knowledgeable audience for the additions to the commemorative landscape. But when the attempts for recognition made by the subaltern fall outside “the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation”⁵⁶ the representation is not always understood.

Karen Shelby is an Associate Professor of Art History at Baruch College, The City University of New York and the co-founder of Art History Teaching Resources, a peer-populated platform for art history teachers. Her publications focus on art history and pedagogy, the visual culture of the Great War, including the politics of exhibition narrative, memorial and cemetery design, and the role of pilgrimage in First World War remembrance. She is currently writing about contemporary Belgian artist Kris Martin and preparing a book project addressing the innovative exhibition practices of Belgian curator Jan Hoet.

55. BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, Berkeley, 1998, p. 167.

56. GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, “Can the Subaltern Speak.” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. C. NELSON and L. GROSSBERG, eds. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988, p. 306.